

Ignacio Peralta House
561 Lafayette Avenue
San Leandro, Alameda County
California

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
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450 Golden Gate Avenue
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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

CAL-1896
Page 1

IGNACIO PERALTA HOUSE

San Leandro, Alameda County, California

ADDRESS: 561 Lafayette Avenue (Corner of Leo Avenue)
OWNER: Alta Mira Club
OCCUPANT: Alta Mira Club
USE: Women's Club

ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Ignacio Peralta house was built in 1860 by W. P. Toler (Peralta's son-in-law); it is said to be the first brick house erected in Alameda County. A. C. Peachey purchased the house from Rafaela Sanchez Peralta (Ignacio's widow) on May 18, 1875. Immediately thereafter Peachey added a large wood extension at the back of the brick house, with important dining room, gallery, etc. Technically a two and one-half story building, the old Peralto house had its main reception rooms on the second story; Peachey continued this emphasis on the second story in his additions, treating the ground floor as a basement.

The house remained in the Peachey family for thirty four years. Between 1909 and 1926, it went to Daniel and C. L. Best. Eventually, in November of 1926, it was purchased by the Alta Mira Club, who have preserved it remarkably well, albeit with modifications of interior (particularly Peachey's additions) and exterior. One of the most interesting of 19th century houses in San Leandro, it has additional historic associations with the large and land-rich Peralta family - pioneers of the area. It is California Registered Historical Landmark 285.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The founder of the Peraltas' vast land holdings in the East Bay was Luis Maria Peralta (1795-1851). Of his four surviving sons, Hermengildo Ignacio was the eldest. Born on April 3, 1791, Ignacio was small like his father (about five feet tall), but slight of build and light of complexion. Don Luis had received a large grant of land in northern California on October 20, 1820 - now estimated to be about sixty-eight square miles in size and extending from San Leandro Creek to the extreme northwestern part of Alameda County, San Pablo Road. It included the areas now occupied by both Alameda and Oakland. Peralta had been an obscure soldier, receiving the property for forty years of meritorious service. At the time of the grant, he was an officer at the Presidio in San Francisco.

Don Luis preferred not to live on his Rancho San Antonio, and visited it only occasionally during his own life time. Squatters and western carpetbaggers helped to reduce the size of the ranch in the 1840's and 1850's. Don Luis divided his property in the East Bay among his four sons before dying in 1851. Each son built one or more houses on his portion, and the complex history of these various Peralta houses (mostly built of adobe and one-story in height) is well researched by J. N. Bowman.¹

Ignacio inherited the southerly portion of Rancho San Antonio, which was potentially the richest and most valuable part of the ranch. Here he raised cattle, as well as various grains, and soon was supplying visiting ships with hides and tallow in return for what he wanted in goods like saddles, fabrics, wines, etc. At this point, an American named W. P. Toler entered the picture.

Toler was a graduate of West Point and served on the west coast during the seizure of Monterey in 1846. He is said to have been the person who actually raised the American flag at Monterey on July 7, 1846. Upon his resignation from the navy, Toler settled in northern California and in 1853 married Antonia Maria Peralta, daughter of Ignacio and Rafaela Sanchez Peralta.² Soon thereafter, Toler built a two-story frame house for himself and his new bride at what is now 948 Peralta Avenue.³

Ignacio and his wife looked forward to something more ambitious than their adobe residences. In 1854 Peralta had deeded 158 acres to

CAL-1896

Page 3

W. P. Toler and his wife; on May 24, 1860 the property was deeded back to Ignacio Peralta, and in 1860 construction was begun on a two story brick building - with W. P. Toler apparently supervising and/or working on its erection.⁴ The principal reception rooms were on the second floor; but it required no difficulty for persons accustomed to adobe dwellings and hard earth floors to also live much of their daily life in what one would now call a basement.

Above the main floor was a kind of attic, which may have been added by Peachey. Toler and his wife joined the aged Peraltas in the brick house about 1872 helping to care for them. Ignacio died on May 9, 1874. Mrs. Peralta sold the brick house to A. C. Peachey on May 18, 1875. The Tolers built a small brick house on land deeded to them by Rafaela Sanchez Peralta. One assumes that Mrs. Peralta joined them after selling the older and larger brick residence, nearby.

Peachey subsequently began construction of a major addition to the rear of the Ignacio Peralta house, with emphasis on a splendid large dining room, a gallery-trophy room, etc. The older brick house was slightly modified interiorly (the attic and stair to the attic may be of this era), with particular attention being given to new wall paper imported from Europe and hand-painted ceiling frescoes. The Peacheys continued to live in the composite, revised house until 1909. At that time, Peachey deeded it to Daniel Best, who in turn deeded it to C. L. Best in 1912. Mr. C. L. Best, a well known figure in local affairs, lived in the house until 1926. Early that year, the Fred T. Wood Company purchased the house and what land remained from the old homestead. In November 1926, the Alta Mira Club - a women's organization - purchased the house. Aside from certain radical revisions of the former Peachey and Best gallery and dining room area, insertion of a new kitchen nearby, removal of a veranda off the dining room, and a major structural revision of the front porch (using portions of the old veranda in the revision), the composite brick and wood structure was thoughtfully untouched except for necessary and continuing improvements of heating and other practical considerations. The old wall paper and ceiling frescoes in the brick part second floor are well preserved, and period furniture aids in recreating an image of 19th century elegance. This portion of the house is used primarily for weddings, now. As a private club, the building is not officially open to the public except as participants in a social or wedding function; the caretaker, however, graciously provides information and occasional tours to serious students of the period.

NOTES (Historical Information)

1. See J. N. Bowman, "The Peraltas and their Homes", California Historical Society Quarterly, p. 224 and Note 34. A typescript, from which some of this article was derived and revised, is now at the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, as "The Early Peraltas and Rancho San Antonio"; see especially pp. 10-11, and Note 35. (The deeds cited in Note 35 of the typescript, which bear on the brick house, have been changed in some instances in the Quarterly article, suggestive that Bowman found the Deeds D, 11; J, 306, 607; L, 315 in the Alameda County Recorder's Office, Oakland, the most meaningful, rather than Land Cases 87ND and Deeds J, 607, 704; L, 316 cited in the typescript at the Bancroft Library.)
2. Their marriage date is sometimes given as 1852.
3. This house was painted yellow, and is thought to have been moved from its original location nearby.
4. The brick house was built on the southern part of that portion of the Rancho San Antonio which Ignacio had inherited. (Each portion had a special name relating to the particular brother who owned it.) The solid brick residence was set back some hundreds of feet from the main highway (now East 14th Street). The address used to be given as East 13th Street and Cherrywood, but with the renaming of streets and the addition of smaller connecting streets (and subsequent diminution of the former Peralta property) it is now Lafayette and Leo Avenues.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS AND SOURCES

Alves, Jack E. "Peralta House", Paper submitted to Art 188B, University of California, Davis, June 8, 1961.

Bowman, J. N. "The Peraltas and Their Homes, " California Historical Society Quarterly, Vol. XXX, No. 3, (September 1951), pp. 217-231; also a typescript by the same author, which preceded the Quarterly article, entitled "The Early Peraltas and Rancho San Antonio" - deposited at the Bancroft Library (m F 868 A3 B 7).

California Registered Historical Landmark 285 (See plaque on front of house, placed October 24, 1949).

HABS
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CAL-1896

Page 5

Freeman, Leslie J. Alameda County: Past and Present, Press of the San Leandro Reporter, 1946, pp. 34-35; same author, Historic San Leandro, Published by the San Leandro News, 1940, p. 11 (Freeman's facts are garbled and there are numerous mis-spellings, etc.; unreliable).

Hoover and Rensch. Historic Spots in California, (one Vol. ed., revised), Stanford University Press, 1948, p. 218.

Oakland Tribune, January 11, 1937 and October 26, 1949.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

EXTERIOR

Built at two periods, the Peralta house with Peachey additions shows both changes of construction and style. The Peralta house was a simple brick box, with exterior walls plastered and painted (giving it the appearance of adobe). Since the attic story and present hipped roof may not be earlier than the Peachey additions to the rear of the Peralta house (with necessary surface changes of roofing in the passage of time), one assumes that the only indications of "style" on the exterior of the Ignacio Peralta house were the rather long, narrow windows on the sides (suggestive of Italianate influence at its very simplest) and the triple "portals" on the second level of the facade (technically, the openings at either side of the central front door are windows, but the effect is of doors). No ornamental detail of any consequence remains around the windows of the sides of the house, if there ever were any. The facade openings have pseudo-hood molds with Italianate keystones in their upper center and console supports at lowest point, left and right. The depth of reveals of these main facade openings is suggestive of the thickness of house walls; lined with simple paneling they echo quietly the fascination with multiple moldings common in later Victorian architecture.

As for the Peachey addition of 1875 ff., it is distinctly late Italianate. Executed in wood, it reveals more potential for ornamental detail. The simple horizontal siding is punctuated by tall, narrow windows with "eared" and stepped moldings at the top, and with foliate enrichments of either intensely flat or obviously plastic character (indicative of the ambivalent attitudes of Mannerism which underlie so much of Italianate ornament).

CAL-1896

Page 6

Building corners are emphasized with strip moldings which vaguely anticipate the Stick style of the 1880's. At the roof level, paired brackets based hazily on Classical console models show the fascination with echoing repetition of accent in the later Victorian, as opposed to the sobriety of Classical Revival. (The simple wooden brackets at the eaves of the Peralta brick house are indeterminate in style and date, and present no clear-cut stylistic character. They may even be 20th century.) The once attractive veranda off the south side of the house, beyond Peachey's grandiloquent new dining room, has been removed. The present front porch and the little porch on the north side of Peachey's addition are 20th century reversions to "Mission Style" - with tile roofs and simple, massive, hand hewn timber supports. (Some of the stained glass in the old veranda's curtain walls has been incorporated into large curtain walls of glass panes at either end of the present front porch.)

INTERIOR

One must always remember that this house was originally planned as two living stories, with what one would today call a basement as the dining and kitchen area - and perhaps even bedrooms at that level. Peachey clearly rejected this early California acceptance of earthen floors as unsuitable for his time and means. It was he who more definitely emphasized the former second floor of the Peralta house as his main or "first" floor. The location of bedrooms and baths in both the Peralta and Peachey eras is unclear. The Peraltas would not have been unduly concerned about bathrooms; but by Peachey's time, this was more important. The present use of the house follows the emphasis of Peachey's time and later; the ground floor is a service and basement area, and the "second" floor is considered the "first" floor.

One of the most attractive features of the house today are the great doors. Those at the entrance are of clear and colored "art glass" (which was generally not popular until the 1880's and especially the 1890's). Beyond is a small foyer with wall paper and frescoes of the Peachey era. At the right is a large double parlor, with each room separated by a lofty arch. (All wooden moldings added by Peachey, including the outlining of this arch, were of redwood painted to imitate more elaborate grained woods such as oak.) To the left of the entrance are two separate rooms, of uncertain original use (perhaps, study and bedroom).

CAL-1896

Page 7

All of these rooms were, as mentioned before, redecorated by Peachey, and have elegant wall paper, imported from France, above an eight inch baseboard with contrasting horizontal wall paper band under coved ceiling moldings, as well as handsomely painted fresco ceilings. Beyond the entrance foyer, and servicing the back parlors and two smaller (bedrooms? - now baths) rooms at the extreme west of the Peralta's brick house, is a long hall, entered by beautifully preserved double doors with cut and etched glass panels. (They are related to the great entrance doors of the Stanford house and Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento and are obviously of the 1870's.) At the right of the hall, a simple balustraded stair ascends to an attic, said to have been used for guests. The simple hardwood newel post and balustrade of the stair may be of Peachey's time, as may the attic itself. Under this stair is the stair to the ground floor (and this is clearly of the Peralta's time). In Ignacio and Rafaela Peralta's days, this ground floor housed dining room and kitchen (on the north side of the house), with tamped earth floors. The rooms on the south were probably bedrooms. A marble fireplace frame still remains in the old dining room (now used for storage); presently the basement has living quarters for the custodian, and a new furnace in the long corridor at the west side of the brick house. Marble mantels and fireplace frames with cast iron grates also occur in the second or main floor's rooms. The floors here are of softwood covered with carpeting. Furniture is partly original in the brick house; notable are such features as a full length pier glass in the back parlor on the north, and some period tables and chairs. (Ceiling fixtures are 20th century, of gilded plaster.)

The interior of Peachey's addition of 1875 is less well preserved. From the main hall, proceeding back beyond the limits of the brick house, one enters a former picture gallery and trophy room with a most ingenious and well preserved stained glass skylight of rectangular shape. At the left (south) of this gallery were two large rooms - one a dining room, with a three bayed veranda, at the south side of the house. At the right (north) were two long narrow rooms (now updated as a big service kitchen), a long narrow hall leading out to an entrance on what is presently Leo Avenue; and at the extreme west of the wood addition were a large reception room in the center ("The West Hall"; a door led out to the west), with a small square chamber at the south west and a long, narrow chamber at the northwest (now the custodian's kitchen). The original marble fireplace frames and mantels were removed in the early 20th century and replaced by rather unhappy brick designs, after the Bests sold the house. It is difficult to accurately

describe the Peachey addition, as its current use is clearly dictated by the requirements of a woman's club not a private home, and numerous changes have necessarily been made.

SITE

The Alta Mira Club occupies but a fraction of the once extensive Ignacio Peralta property. The land has been reduced by building to the west and south, and by a street to the north. At the east, or main entrance side, there are still two magnificent, huge magnolia trees which flank the path leading to the present front porch. Fountains and an entrance drive which are said to have been in situ until the early 20th century, farther to the east, have disappeared with building between the house and East 14th Street.

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